

News Release



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ELEPHANT SEAL GUIDED WALKS AT AÑO NUEVO STATE RESERVE

Guided walks to see the elephant seals at Año Nuevo State Reserve will begin this year on December 15, 2003 and continue every day through March 31, 2004, except December 25 and January 24, 2004. The Reserve is west of Highway One, between the cities of Santa Cruz and Half Moon Bay, approximately 1 ½ hours drive south of San Francisco.

Reservations are recommended for these guided walks. School Group Walks are offered Monday through Friday mornings for first through 12th grade classes. Public Seal Walks are offered daily for families, individuals, or groups.

Reservation operators will be available through the California State Park's reservation service toll-free, at 1-800-444-4445, from October through February on weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and on weekends from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.; and, March through September from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. - every day except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years Day. **School Group Walk** reservations may be made beginning Saturday, October 4, 2003 for any dates during the season. **Public Seal Walk** reservations will be accepted beginning October 20, up to 56 days in advance, or as late as one day, prior to the reservation date.

School Group tickets cost \$21 each, and allow entry for up to 20 students and two chaperones, for a total group of 22. Two adult chaperones are required per ticket. There is a limit of four School Group Walk tickets per call. Public Seal Walk tickets cost \$4 per person. Children three and under are free. The entrance fee to the Reserve is \$4 per car, paid at the Reserve. There are no ticket refunds or exchanges for cancellations, no shows, weather, or late arrivals. Refunds are issued only when the Reserve staff must cancel a walk.

Reservations are also available for those who wish to enjoy a scenic coastal bus ride to Año Nuevo along with a guided walk. San Mateo County Transit offers weekend and Monday holiday service from mid-January through February that includes transportation and a Public Seal Walk reservation for \$12.00 per person. Busses depart from San Mateo and Half Moon Bay. Reservations or information are available through Sam Trans at 650-508-6441 beginning November 17, 2003.

The first guided walk of every day will begin at approximately 9:00 a.m. and the last walk in mid-afternoon. These popular three-mile walks over rolling sand dunes last about two and one-half hours and are considered moderately strenuous. Each walk will begin on time. Visitors who are late will forfeit their reservations.

Guided Walks are conducted rain or shine. Visitors should prepare for an outdoor hiking adventure that may include high winds, heavy rains, and cold temperatures. Recommended clothing includes hooded rain gear, layered clothing, and sturdy walking shoes. For safety reasons, use of umbrellas is not permitted on the walks. Food and beverages are not sold at the Reserve, but picnic tables are available for use before or after guided walks. Youth groups require adult chaperones. One chaperone is required for every ten youths 17 years or under.

Disabled persons may make reservations for special Equal Access Guided Walks. Equal Access walks are available January 3 through March 28, on weekends only. Reservations are required. Tickets cost \$4.00 per person. Reservations may be made by phoning (650) 879-2033 beginning December 1, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m.

Año Nuevo State Reserve is home to a large colony of Northern Elephant Seals, and the interpretive program has attracted increasing interest every winter for the past 26 years. People who hope to see the seals during the winter breeding season are urged to get reservations early.

The Wildlife Protection Area of the Reserve will be closed except for official guided walks from December 1 - March 31. Similar closures and guided walk programs since 1975 have allowed a natural development of the elephant seal herd. The mainland herd has increased during that time from only 35 males to more than 5,400 animals, including more than 1,700 pups born.

Adult seals begin arriving on the beaches by mid-December. Bulls weighing up to 5,000 pounds engage in battles for breeding access to the females. Pregnant females come ashore to have pups beginning in mid-December, with births reaching a peak by late January. Mothers nurse their pups for about a month before weaning their pup, mating, and departing back to sea. Birthing and mating activity peak by mid February and by early March most adult seals have returned to the sea. During March, hundreds of weaned pups remain behind to rest in the dunes and learn to swim in the tide pools.

State Park volunteer naturalists from the surrounding community take an intensive 2 1/2 month (65 hour) training course given by California State Parks, prior to the breeding season. During the guided walks, they and Reserve staff will lead visitors among the huge marine mammals and explain both the story of the elephant seals and the other natural and cultural history of the area.

For more information on the elephant seal, the guided walk program, and other features of the Reserve, phone the Reserve at (650) 879-2025, or (650) 879-0227 for recorded information. Visit the Reserve's web site at www.parks.ca.gov/anonuevo.

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